

# PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEY TO SPAIN: TRADITION AND FOLKLORE

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*The early church, and especially the church in Spain, has maintained various accounts of the missionary journey by the apostle Paul to Spain. The official and popular traditions are described briefly.*

We shall probably never know whether Paul fulfilled the intention expressed in his Letter to the Romans to visit Spain (Rom 15:24, 28). The early church believed that the apostle's appeal to Caesar terminated successfully, that he was acquitted of the charges against him, and that he spent some years in freedom before he was again imprisoned and sentenced to death. Eusebius writes that "after pleading his cause, he is said to have been sent again upon the ministry of preaching, and after a second visit to the city, he finished his life with martyrdom" (*Hist. eccl.* 2.22).

Evidence of Paul's activity subsequent to the "two whole years" mentioned in Acts 28:30 is found in

three early Christian documents. In A.D. 96 Clement of Rome, whom tradition has identified as Paul's disciple mentioned in Phil 4:3, wrote an epistle to the Corinthians, in which he states that Paul

had been seven times in bonds, had been driven into exile, had been stoned, had preached in the East and in the West, he won the noble renowns which was the reward of his faith, having taught righteousness unto the whole world and having reached the farthest bounds of the West.

For a Roman, the "farthest bounds of the West," a phrase often used by Roman writers to refer to Spain, could only mean the Iberian peninsula. Further, the Acts of Peter, written in the late 2nd century, informs us in some detail about the departure of the Apostle Paul from the Roman harbor of Ostia to Spain. And lastly, the Muratori Canon, compiled by an anonymous Christian about A.D. 170, refers to his Spanish mission. This

document, originally written in Greek and translated into somewhat barbarous Latin, includes the following in its account of the Acts of the Apostles:

Luke puts it shortly to the most excellent Theophilus that several things were done in his own presence, as he also plainly shows by leaving out the passion of Peter and also the departure of Paul from town on his journey to Spain.

By the middle of the 2nd century, Christians believed that the apostle's intended visit to Spain was in fact realized. This is not the place to discuss the manifold arguments for or against the apostle's journey to Spain. It is well known that later accounts of outstanding conquerors, missionaries, and other important personages show a tendency to exaggerate historical facts by representing the territorial extent of their influence as greater than it actually was. It is possible, therefore,

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The statue of St. Paul next to the Metropolitan Cathedral in Tarragona honors and perpetuates the tradition of Paul's missionary journey to Spain.

that the tradition of Paul's mission to Spain is a mere extension of an intent. Treating the apostle's journey as an undoubted historical fact, John Chrysostom mentions that "Paul after his residence in Rome departed to Spain," and Jerome states that the apostle reached Spain by sea.

If Paul realized his plans to visit Spain, he would have considered his stay in Rome as a mere stopover for his mission to the West. In that case, the apostle would have left Rome by the Via Ostiense to Ostia, the new port of imperial Rome. Ostia harbor, begun by Claudius and dedicated as *Portus*

*Augusti* by Nero in A.D. 54, soon became one of the larger cosmopolitan and commercial centers in Italy with more than 50,000 inhabitants. Every year on January 27, large crowds from Rome gathered in Ostia for the celebrations in honor of Castor and Pollux. The Jewish community maintained a synagogue on the outer periphery of the city on the Via Severiana. The recently excavated synagogue in Ostia shows an elaborate vestibule leading to the main building ending in a slightly curved apse; in the southern section was the tabernacle containing the scrolls of the Hebrew scriptures. One would not be surprised if Paul had visited and even preached in this synagogue.

Ostia had rapidly taken over the commerce of Puteoli, and most of the goods destined for Rome arrived in Ostia. According to Strabo, "it was the port-town of the Roman navy, the port into which the Tiber after flowing past Rome, empties." Ships sailed regularly from Ostia to the Spanish ports of Cadiz and Tarraco (Tarragona). According to Pliny the Elder, who under the emperor Vespasian served as procurator in Hispania Tarraconensis, the journey from Ostia to Spain took four days.

The third chapter in the apocryphal Acts of Peter describes in a vivid manner the departure of the Apostle Paul from Ostia harbor:

A great multitude of women were kneeling and praying and beseeching Paul, and they kissed his feet and accompanied him unto the harbor. But Dionysius and Balbus of Asia, knights from Rome, and illustrious men, and a senator by name of Demetrius abode by Paul on his right side and said: "Paul, I would desire to leave the city if I were not a magistrate, that I might not depart from thee." Also from Caesar's house, Cleobius and Iphitus and Philostrate with Narcissus the presbyter accompanied him to the harbor: but whereas a storm of the sea came on, he (Narcissus?) sent the brethren back to Rome, that if any would, he might come down and hear Paul until

he set sail; and hearing that, the brethren went up into the city. And when they told the brethren that had remained in the city, some on beasts, and some on foot, and others by way of the Tiber came down to the harbor, and were confirmed in the faith for three days, and on the fourth until the fifth hour, praying together with Paul, and making the offering, and they put all that was needful on the ship and delivered to him two young men, believers, to sail with him, and bade him farewell in the Lord and returned to Rome.

Tarragona would have been the most likely city for the apostle's mission to Spain. Known as Colonia Julia Victrix Triumphalis Tarraco to commemorate the victories of Julius Caesar, the city was made the seat of one of the four assize courts established in Hispania Citerior. Having spent some time in Tarragona, Augustus made it the capital of the whole province, subsequently named Hispania Tarraconensis. East of the site of the present cathedral the people of Tarragona constructed an altar to Augustus.

An 8th-century Spanish tradition relates that during his mission to the Catalans the Apostle Paul consecrated Prosperus first bishop of Tarragona. Because of intense local persecutions by the Romans, Prosperus fled to Regium Lepidum — Reggio Nell' Emilia, northwest of Bologna — where he was immediately accepted as bishop of the city "because he is the successor of Paul in Tarragona." The 10th-century Greek Menologion and the hagiographer Symeon Metaphrastes mention that Paul, while preaching in Spain, converted the two sisters Xanthippe and Polyxene, who are commemorated in the Greek Orthodox Church on September 23. Xanthippe converted her husband, Philotheus, prefect of Provo (?), to the Christian faith; Polyxene, on the other hand, went to Achaia in Greece, where she was baptized by Andrew the First-called.

Although the patron of Tarragona is St. Fructuosus, who

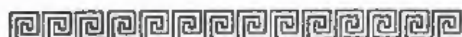


together with Sts. Auguris and Eulogius suffered martyrdom in the local amphitheater in A.D. 259, the Catalans proudly assert their association with the Apostle Paul. Behind the Metropolitan Cathedral, in the cloister of the 19th-century Diocesan Seminary, is the old Chapel of the Apostle Paul which was built, according to Tarragonian tradition



*I hope to see you in  
passing as I go to Spain,  
and to be sped on my  
journey there by you, once  
I have enjoyed your com-  
pany for a little. At  
present, however, I am  
going to Jerusalem with  
aid for the saints . . .  
When therefore I have  
completed this, and have  
delivered to them what has  
been raised, I shall go on  
by way of you to Spain.*

Rom 15:24-25, 28 (RSV)



on the site of Paul's preaching in the city. In 1963, on the occasion of the 19th-centenary celebrations of Paul's preaching to the citizens of Tarragona, a statue of the Apostle Paul was erected on the Plaza de Palazio, next to the Metropolitan Cathedral, which was constructed over the remains of the once lofty temple of Jupiter-Ammon.

The co-patron of Tarragona is Thecla, who is honored here annually on September 23 and whose right arm is said to repose in her chapel in the cathedral. In the principal sanctuary of the cathedral the white marble front of the high altar shows eight magnificent 12th-century reliefs of scenes portraying the beautiful romance of the Apostle Paul and Thecla in Iconium in Asia Minor, a story found in the apocryphal Acts of Paul.

In Tortosa, a Roman colony 55 km. southwest of Tarragona on the River Ebro, a local tradition claims Paul to have founded the local church and consecrated Rufus, the son of Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21; Rom 16:13) as the first bishop of the city.

In addition to the Catalan traditions of the visit of Paul to Spain, there is an Andalusian cycle of legends maintained by the Christians in Ecija, ancient Astigis, in the province of Seville. These 16th-century traditions hold that the apostle sailed from Ostia to Cadiz, then proceeded to the Roman colony of Astigis, known as Augusta Firma. Hierotheus, a citizen of Astigis, is said to have traveled to Achaia where he was converted in Athens by Paul's preaching. Paul consecrated him first bishop of Athens, whereupon Hierotheus asked the apostle to visit his native city. After his first Roman imprisonment Paul remembered the request of

Hierotheus and went to Astigis. His preaching in the forum converted many people, among them Crispin, whom he ordained bishop of Astigis. With Crispin as patron of the shoemakers, it is no coincidence that throughout the centuries Ecija was famous all over Spain for its shoemaking!

None of the local Spanish traditions can be traced to a period prior to the 8th century, and many of them emerged during the 14th century and even later. In the early 1960's several Spanish communities celebrated the 19th centenary of the arrival of the Apostle Paul in Spain, and in 1961 the Spanish postal authorities issued a 1-peseta commemorative stamp showing El Greco's Apostle Paul with the text:

XIX CENTENARIO  
DE LA VENIDA DE SAN PABLO  
A ESPAÑA

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